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### **Media Companies and Anti-Vaccination Content in the Digital Space**

In 2017, only 52 percent of those surveyed in the United States correctly stated that vaccines do not cause autism in healthy children, (Ipsos). With the rise of anti-vaccination content on blogs and video-sharing websites such as YouTube in 2019, whether or not parents and legal guardians should have a choice in vaccinating their children has revived for debate. Due to the dire nature of vaccination rates being too low in the United States, as well as mandated vaccination precedent in legislation and policies, our recommendation for media organizations today is to follow in the footsteps of Google and Facebook by re-establishing internal rights to subject content to fact-checking, and even demonetizing or displaying warnings on externally-generated content concerning vaccines.

### **Vaccination Rates are Too Low Even for “Herd Immunity”**

PBS noted in its Body +Brain coverage that the concept of “herd immunity” could ideally create communities in which even unvaccinated members were protected from disease, (Helft). This would be the only case in which, through a “dying out” of disease, less than 100 percent of members of a community would have to be vaccinated in order to be completely protected and healthy. However, in order to work, “this protection requires that a certain percentage of people in a community be vaccinated,” (Helft). Ultimately, this vaccination percentage threshold represents a numerical benchmark to estimate when a disease would die out simply due to being unable to be transmitted to unvaccinated individuals.

However, in the United States, the percentage of children aged 19-35 months who received all doses of recommended vaccines in 2017 ranged between 70.4 and 92.7 percent,

(CDC). While these percentages may seem high, “herd immunity” threshold estimates range from 75 to 94 percent of a community population needing to be vaccinated in order to theoretically protect the entire community from infection. Thus, the constant battle between pro and anti-vaxxers continues despite the technical ability for both to coexist in disproportional harmony.

While media organizations cannot be held solely responsible particularly for user-generated content, the drastic threat of disease that comes with vaccine misinformation and too-low acceptance of vaccines even by “herd immunity” standards suggests all media organizations should point to proper vaccine information, or have a clear policy on their dedication to factual vaccination information from in-house content creators at the very least. This can reduce potential liability regarding published user-submitted content for the media organization as well.

### **Anti-Vaccine Beliefs and the Law**

In addition to the statistical health hazards of low vaccination rates in the United States, political precedent and current legislation also supports media organizations adopting similar dedication to public health and truthful vaccination information. According to the Washington Post, since a 1905 Supreme Court ruling on *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, “it has been widely understood that states are legally allowed to require vaccination in matters of public health,” (Mettler). This particular ruling stemmed from a worldwide vaccination campaign that successfully eradicated smallpox globally in 1977.

The Kunkels, a family in Kentucky, have quickly become the face of anti-vaxxers in 2019. The family filed their lawsuit on Thursday, March 7th in the Boone County Circuit Court, accusing the Northern Kentucky Health Department of violating their son’s First Amendment

rights (Mettler). Their son, Jerome, had been banned from attending his classroom and athletic events at Assumption Academy following an outbreak of chickenpox in February.

The family stated that accepting the chickenpox vaccine would be “immoral, illegal and sinful,” (Mettler). Despite their argument that vaccine freedom is an individual freedom protected under the First Amendment, the Kentucky state statute allows health officials to take action and even enforce a quarantine in the interest of public health. This statute echoes *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*.

Additionally, Kentucky does not stand alone in terms of state policies concerning vaccine mandates. In fact, several states, including “Washington, where measles outbreaks are fierce- lawmakers are moving to tighten lax laws that allow parents to opt out of vaccinating their children for personal or philosophical reasons,” (Ducharme). Arizona is one named state on the opposite end of the spectrum, where lawmakers are trying to weaken laws and make vaccine exemptions easier to attain.

While diversity in religion and philosophical beliefs are more than deserving of respect in the United States, media companies must act in the interest of public health and public interest. It would be wise for media companies today to air on the side of caution when it comes to anti-vaccination content. This can ensure a reduction in legal liability, as legislation is moving constantly toward pro-vaccination jargon, as well as to best serve the public at large, that is consistently put in danger by an insufficient percentage of vaccinations nation and worldwide.

### **Media Companies on Anti-Vaccine Content**

“Vaccine hesitancy” was identified as one of this year’s 10 notable threats to global health by the World Health Organization, (Caron). With the consistent threat of preventable diseases, the question of social responsibility when it comes to media businesses and their

content concerning vaccinations is widespread. In fact, in February of this year, Democratic Representative Adam Schiff of California “sent letters to the CEOs of YouTube and Facebook demanding they answer questions about the spread of anti-vaccine information on their company’s platforms,” (Matsakis).

In Australia, a quality assessment tool was created by the World Health Organization Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety (GACVS). This tool assessed the quality of different vaccine safety websites and concluded that “the average quality score for pro-vaccine sites was 61/100, while the average score for anti-vaccine sites was 30/100,” (Wiley). With only 24 percent of adults in the United States claiming to not use social media for news consumption in 2018, (The Hollywood Reporter) the availability of quality vaccination sites online is worrisome at best.

Additionally, 89 percent of adults in the United States found social media sites like YouTube and Facebook at least partly responsible for the spread of fake news online, (Monmouth University). Thus, to further form our recommendation to media companies today, we will look at recent policies implemented by companies including Google’s YouTube, Facebook, as well as Pinterest.

## **YouTube**

YouTube hasn’t received backlash from government figures alone. YouTube ad revenue is shared with YouTube itself as well as video creators online. However, the rise of user-generated anti-vaccination content on YouTube has caused friction between advertisers, YouTube and content creators as well.

The health tech company Nomad Health in a conversation with BuzzFeed News condemned the anti-vaccination movement, and in terms of YouTube ads, said that they were “‘not aware of our ads running alongside anti-vaccination videos,’ and would ‘take action to prevent it from happening in the future,’”(O’Donovan).

On February 22nd, YouTube announced that they would be removing ads from running on some anti-vaccination videos. In a statement, one YouTube spokesperson stated, “‘We have strict policies that govern what videos we allow ads to appear on, and videos that promote anti-vaccination content are a violation of those policies. We enforce these policies vigorously, and if we find a video that violates them, we immediately take action and remove ads,’” (O’Donovan).

Despite the plethora of anti-vaccination content creators on YouTube, YouTube has decided to protect its relationships with advertisers as well as lawmakers and pull ads from anti-vaccination content online. Media companies, particularly those relying on advertising revenue, should consider following this conglomerate’s move to preserve its essential relationships and stay on the side of lawful caution.

## **Facebook**

Misinformation on vaccination content has been widespread on Facebook. In 2016, Kate Faasse Ph.D. writing for Elsevier explored the different comments for and against vaccination under a viral Facebook post. She found that while “‘the anti-vaccination stance is not scientifically-based, comments showed evidence of greater analytical thinking, and more references to health and the body. In contrast, pro-vaccination comments demonstrated greater comparative anxiety, with a particular focus on family and social processes,’” (Faasse).

This finding contributes to the widespread misinformation concerning vaccines throughout social media today. While an appeal to logos can be persuasive in any format, these

particular anti-vaccination comments represent a large danger in terms of public health being perpetuated on the Facebook platform.

In response to the dangerous growth of anti-vaccination content online, Facebook announced on March 7th that it will be “diminishing the reach of anti-vaccine information on its platform. It will no longer allow it to be promoted through ads or recommendations and will make it less prominent in search results,” (Matsakis).

More specifically, Monika Bickert, vice president of global policy management at Facebook, wrote a full blog post stating that Facebook will indeed reject ads that include false information about vaccines, (Matsakis). In February, more than 150 anti-vaccine ads were bought on Facebook according to the Daily Beast. Bickert also stated that ad targeting categories such as “vaccine controversies” have been removed, (Matsakis). Paired with the takedown of false vaccine information, this can prevent harmful targeting even though categories such as “interested in pregnancy” still exist for other, less harmful, ads.

While YouTube’s move removed ads from anti-vaccination content but did not remove said content, Facebook’s move to disallow ads for false vaccination content may result in less anti-vaccination content reach overall. Facebook ads on anti-vaccination were primed to reach further audiences that had not been exposed to the idea beforehand, while YouTube anti-vaccination content was not addressed in terms of their own ads for a farther reach.

In any case, Facebook’s move to remove ad options for anti-vaccination content stands as an ideal example of a media company taking charge of content on its site in the interest of public health as well as public trust and lawfulness online.

## **Pinterest**

Pinterest's approach to vaccination content stands as the most robust compared to YouTube and Facebook. Back in 2017, Pinterest banned "anti-vaccination advice" from returning results, (Matsakis). Currently, Pinterest has "stopped returning results for searches related to vaccinations, a drastic step the social-media company said is aimed at curbing the spread of misinformation," (McMillan). Unlike YouTube and Facebook whose policies target monetization methods when it comes to anti-vaccination content placement or belief groups, Pinterest has decided to stop hosting all vaccination-related content online.

This results-blocking method blocks any ranking pins that mention vaccines, not just ones about the "dangers" of vaccination. Jamie Favazza, a spokeswoman for Pinterest, states that "Right now, blocking results in search is a temporary solution to prevent people from encountering harmful misinformation," (Caron). Pinterest is working with industry experts to create a more tailored, long-term approach in the future, (Caron).

### **Recommendations for Media Companies**

While the existence of anti-vaccination believers is important and vital to respect in concept, the fact remains that low vaccination rates are deadly and dangerous. With policymakers on the verge of enforcing stricter vaccination policies and media companies such as YouTube, Facebook and Pinterest opting to crackdown on untrue vaccination content, or even opting to withhold participation from the vaccination discussion as a whole, it is a solid recommendation for any media company of today to follow suit in implementing mission statements and fact-checking procedures for all vaccination-related content they publish online.

With outbreaks continuing to cross the United States, vaccine skepticism will continue to wane. Just last week on April 9th, New York City declared a public health emergency after a measles outbreak. According to CBS News, "the declaration requires all unvaccinated people

who may have been exposed to the virus to get the vaccine, including children over 6 months old. People who ignore the order could be fined \$1,000,” (CBS). Once again, the concern for public health trumps values of “vaccine freedom,” and suggests that in order to stay in accordance with state regulations, media companies should follow suit in the support of pro-vaccination content and fact-checking otherwise.

Finally, according to Dr. Scott Gottlieb from the Food and Drug Administration in February, policies at the federal level may eventually be put into effect to further mandate vaccine use. As Axios, as well as Ducharme, shared, Dr. Gottlieb “hinted at someday instating federal vaccine policies if state exemptions continue to allow outbreaks,” (Ducharme). It is true that states’ rights and anti-vaccine advocates criticize this proposal. However, the momentum toward increased regulation of anti-vaccine content and vaccine requirements within U.S. government supports our recommendation to follow in the footsteps of media conglomerates such as YouTube and Facebook, or even potentially Pinterest, and ultimately do our due diligence in fact-checking and even demonetizing or removing potentially harmful anti-vaccination content online.

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